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SUBJECT: LEBANON: JA'JA' BRINGS IDEAS DOWN FROM THE MOUNTAIN

Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey Feltman for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) Samir Geagea, newly installed in the hills north of Beirut (vice the distant Cedars region), advocated to the Ambassador early parliamentary elections, prior to the presidential election, as a "master stroke" for March 14. He acknowledged, however, that March 14 forces are divided over what type of election law could be used. UNIFIL's worries over possible attacks, as well as concern over arms smuggling to Hizballah, should lead the international community to plan to strikes on Syrian military sites, should UNIFIL be hit. Unlike some recent whispered worries from other pro-government figures, Geagea would not budge on the current draft of legislation to enact the international tribunal, comparing any softening of the tribunal's provisions to "losing an arm." Finally, Michel Aoun's poor judgment represents a destabilizing threat to Lebanon and he should not be allowed to become president. End Summary.

¶2. (C) The Ambassador and EconOff visited Dr. Samir Geagea, leader of the Lebanese Forces party, January 17 in a hotel in the Bzummar area outside Beirut. Geagea is supervising the construction of his new home nearby after leaving the mountainous Cedars late last year. Geagea offered a broad-reaching analysis of the current situation, while admitting that neither he nor either of the opposing sides in this debate has a "clear idea" of what will happen next. Geagea had assessed all the possibilities currently under discussion, both rumors and public proposals. More than once he mentioned that certain ideas "should be aired" even if they were bad ideas. Even ideas which he will not support, such as the Aoun presidency, have been re-examined by him and not dismissed lightly.

EARLY ELECTIONS COULD
BE "MASTER STROKE"

¶3. (C) Geagea asked us to pay attention to his key proposals, even though he has not yet discussed them with the rest of the March 14 bloc. Admitting that he was picking up an issue first proposed by the March 8-Aoun opposition, Geagea believes that early parliamentary elections could bring an end to the current stand-off. By calling the March 8-Aoun bluff, he calls early legislative elections a possible "master stroke." He acknowledged that early legislative elections would require a speedy resolution to the question of a new electoral law, something that he admitted could hurt

Lebanese Christians. Geagea nevertheless maintained that elections could be held prior to the selection of a new president, which Parliament must do in September of this year. Geagea cautioned that the March 14 alliance should be fully prepared to contest early elections, although the opposition would no doubt reverse course and ultimately oppose the idea. Campaigning would be costly -- he hinted briefly that foreign funds might be required -- but the outcome would be worthwhile. Geagea did not dismiss other options, such as Arab League Secretary-General Amr Moussa's 19-10-1 cabinet proposal. But he admitted that, after much Geagea-esque contemplation, he had concluded that parliamentary elections should come first. New presidential elections thereafter would constitutionally lead to a new cabinet anyway.

PROBLEMS WITH REDISTRICTING

14. (C) Geagea dismissed the possibility of additional dangers to March 14 figures as a result of an early election, saying that all the Ministers and MPs are already in danger until the political conflict is resolved. He also appeared willing to accept the possibility of a reduction in Christian influence, and quickly outlined the possible outcomes based on the implementation of various proposals from the past. The 1960 electoral re-districting proposal -- that divides Lebanon into 26 "qada" districts, with qada' lists decided by majoritarian voting -- would allow voters from Christian areas to elect a possible 44 of the 64 seats reserved for Christians in the Parliament. The law proposed by the Fouad Boutros Commission would be "more fair" with a possible 53 Christian seats coming from those areas. However, his favorite option would be to use the 1960 districts (qada') for the most part, but with races decided on proportional

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representation. The main reason he has not discussed this with March 14 is that it would be "catastrophic" for both Hariri and Jumblatt, who would lose seats. Therefore the acceptance of this proposal by March 14 would be a "real breakthrough" and would seriously weaken the opposition.

NO COMPROMISE PRESIDENT

15. (C) One thing that would break the Christians and March 14 would be a compromise in the presidency, Geagea said adamantly. Why, he asked, should there be a compromise in the presidency, rather than a compromise speaker or prime minister? Geagea had given some thought to allowing Aoun to become president, but said that there is no way to know which way Aoun would go after reaching that overriding goal. He said that Aoun obviously prefers chaos to losing the presidency, and that he might push for violence without clearly understanding the results. Saying that he had been approached with the idea of allowing Aoun the presidency by both Jumblatt and Hariri, he had made it clear that he would not support it, and was assured that it would not be proposed by either without further discussion with Geagea. In this light he pointed out that paradoxically, Amal and Hizballah are currently "allies in non-violence."

SYRIA COULD BE DETERRED

16. (C) Geagea does not believe that Hizballah's aim at this time -- a position he made clear could change easily -- is either violence or a resumption of hostilities with Israel. However, he does believe that Syria is pushing for wide-spread violence and the fall of the existing order. The pro-Syrian parties within Lebanon -- Wi'am Wahab's group, independents such as Omar Karami, and others -- are supporting this agenda. Syria is currently doing all it can to destabilize Lebanon from within, and the only thing that will stop it would be massive retaliation, lead by a

multi-national force, striking at Syrian military targets, if installations like UNIFIL are attacked. With no loss of civilian life, this would not only cripple Syria, but would send a clear signal that the United States does not intend to depart the region, and would at the same time give Lebanon time to resolve internal issues. Geagea, like others, believes that Hizballah is targeting UNIFIL, and that it would be "rational" to assume that any attack on UNIFIL would originate from Syria. While it would be very difficult and costly to fight Hizballah inside of Lebanon, an attack on Syrian military targets would achieve the same result.

WHERE IS IRAN?

17. (C) As for Iran, Geagea believes that, while earlier they were not in favor of widespread violence, Iran is now "not far from accepting" the idea. If they threw their weight behind the notion, coupled with the Syrians, it might be difficult for Hizballah to resist, and currently Hizballah is the only one who can push the country to sustained violent conflict. Geagea dismissed the notion that assassinations of public figures such as Jumblatt or he himself would have the same effect, saying that they are not "easy assumptions" at this time, since actions such as the arrests of SSNP members, while not reaching to the core of the problem, have had a discouraging effect. A recent rapprochement between Iran and the Saudis will help, because the Iranians would now have more to lose in the Islamic arena. But conversely, if Iran is pushed into a corner by the international community this could worsen the problem. Acting directly, or through Hizballah as proxy, Iran would see an attack on UNIFIL as achieving two benefits: an attack on the UN, and a direct hit to Lebanon. The mere fact of a potential problem in the south would continue to keep Lebanon tense.

THE TRIBUNAL STAYS AS IT IS

18. (C) On the subject of the international tribunal Geagea was particularly adamant, saying that any weakening of the position would be like "throwing away one of our arms." Syria would become even more aggressive, and he could not support the idea of any changes to the current government position.

AND NOW FOR EVERYONE ELSE...

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19. (C) Speaking of the opposition, Geagea expressed his opinion that both Elie Skaff and the Tashnaq party (both part of the Aoun parliamentary bloc) have now evolved to a compromise view. Although he said that trying to bring Skaff's 5-member bloc over to March 14 would be possible, he speculated that it would require a lot of effort and would not really change the balance of power. About Tashnaq, however, Geagea acknowledged that it had been a big mistake to refuse Tashnaq "at least two" seats in Beirut at the time of the March 14 alliance. They are credible, and it is "crucial" to take them on board. He asked the Ambassador to work with them, and to encourage members of March 14 to do so as well.

10. (C) Geagea reported that he is not talking to Aoun or his followers -- he says that Aoun has no advisors, only followers -- very much lately. This is because Aoun's situation has become critical and Geagea does not wish to resuscitate Aoun's declining political fortunes. Geagea believes that Aoun will find someone to run in the Metn by-election against former President Amine Gemayel, although it is difficult to see how Gemayel could lose. Aoun really believes that his candidate will win, which is further proof that his poor judgment carries a high risk for the country. As for Speaker Berri, he is "shy" and won't meet, even

declining a ceremonial visit by Geagea on the recent Muslim Eid holiday. Berri said he was not receiving visitors.

INCLUDING HIZBALLAH

¶11. (C) On a final note, Geagea commented broadly on Hizballah. He estimated the current state of support for Hizballah among the Shia population as "not bad," with about 50 percent of Shia fully in support. At the same time, he says that Shia are "living a dream" and do not see the world "as we do." Nasrallah wants to control the direction of the "central state," or at least the strategic vision. Although he now denies it, Nasrallah did say that he did not plan for the July war. In Geagea's opinion Nasrallah accepted USCSR 1701 only because he was squeezed by the war, and was unpleasantly surprised when the GOL unexpectedly adhered to the resolution. Although he recognized the quantity of weapons coming in over the Syrian border, he believed that Prime Minister Siniora cannot risk a closure of the border by the Syrians, which would mean economic death for the Lebanese. He suggested that such a catastrophe could only be avoided by measures such as an aerial bridge or some other way to avoid Syrian control over Lebanese exports. In this context, he repeated his call for a definitive strike against Syrian military targets.

COMMENT

¶12. (C) Geagea, who cultivates an image as a hermetic deep thinker, does not make comments lightly. His unorthodox reference to early legislative elections was not a throwaway line. He has calculated that the March 8-Aoun opposition's call for early legislative elections is a bluff -- and that, if legislative elections were moved forward (from the 2009 scheduled dates), the March 14 alliance would actually confirm its majority status. That calculation may indeed be correct in theory. But we do not see anyway to pursue Geagea's idea without splitting the March 14 alliance over the type of election law to be used. The 2000 election law that brought the March 14 alliance to power has been thoroughly discredited (ironically, by those like Suleiman Franjeh and Omar Karami who originally voted for it).

¶13. (C) But using qada districting proportionally, as Geagea proposes, would disadvantage Saad Hariri and Walid Jumblatt, Geagea's allies. The Christians who win seats in Beirut on Hariri's ticket or in the Chouf on Jumblatt's ticket in the winner-take-all system now in place could, in a proportional system, accumulate sufficient Christian votes to be elected from Christian parties like Geagea's Lebanese Forces (LF) or even Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement. This should not matter if LF candidates win -- LF is allied with Jumblatt and Hariri, for example, and thus the seats would remain part of the March 14 alliance. But, in the Lebanese context, this matters very, very much: Hariri is unlikely to cede seats to the Christians easily. (We recall vividly how hard it was to convince Hariri to place someone considered a

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credible Maronite -- Solange Gemayel, widow of Bashir -- on his Beirut ticket.) On the bright side, differences of views over an election law can also sow divisions within the March 8-Aoun bloc: while Aoun will insist on "Christians electing Christians" in small districts, and Hizballah probably will fare well under any system, Nabih Berri (a victim of sharply declining popularity) will want the largest districts possible in order to accumulate enough votes to retain a bloc. All of this suggests to us that, while we should indeed push for early debate of a new legislative electoral law and system to replace the badly flawed one now in place, early legislative elections are not a realistic way out of the current political crisis.

FELTMAN